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SOME HIGHWAYS OF ALBANIA AND A FORGOTTEN RIVIERA

By GEORGE P. SCRIVEN
Brigadier General, U. S. A.

Of the minor events of the war whose effects have proved constructive rather than destructive one of the most striking is the opening up of certain difficult and little-known regions. In such regions as were the theater of operations there were established military bases and depots, seaports and centers of business, railroads and roads, many of which will remain as permanent aids to commerce and will open the way for more extensive intercourse in the future.

Of the more conspicuous works of this kind may be instanced the vitalization of southern Albania under Allied occupation. Valona from a forgotten hamlet grew into an important seaport and military base,¹ and from it were pushed out the splendid motor roads north, east, and south that now unite erstwhile isolated back country and seacoast.

The first roads built by the Italians in Albania were intended, of course, for army purposes; but even those were constructed, in the Italian fashion, to last through the years, and they will remain long after the soldier has gone his way. Others, less obviously military, were designed to open the land to its own inhabitants—to make intercourse practicable and perhaps later to invite the outlander and his trade. Of these new highways there are two that deserve especially the notice of the stranger interested in this fascinating land. They pass through scenes of rare beauty and attraction, among an interesting people, and by places which, though vividly historic and filled with an Old World charm, have been lost for centuries among their unapproachable hills.

THE HIGHWAY FROM VALONA TO THE SOUTHERN FRONTIER

The first of these roads is that running from Valona to the southern frontier via Tepeleni and Argyrokastro. Leaving the coast it first winds through great groves of olive trees for the planting of which the thrifty Venetians once paid the natives a liberal bounty, later recovered by a tax on the fruit. The policy proved successful, however, since the century-old groves are among the finest in existence, and the way through them is as pleasant as a drive through some great park as the road winds smoothly over the hills. Presently it begins to climb in a long zigzag course, steep to look at but with a grade never more than twelve per cent, the Italian

¹ The ports of Valona and Santi Quaranta are illustrated in the article by H. Charles Woods: *Albania and the Albanians*, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 5, 1918, pp. 257-273.

limit for motor roads in the Balkans. Soon the pass of Babica is reached, and beyond lies the shallow Sushitsa, behind which in the war days lay the second line of the Italian defense. In front a fertile valley extends to the slopes of the Maya Kulchit, a great mountain rising 6,000 feet above the Vyosa. The Vyosa, a rapid and treacherous river coming down from the Pindus Mountains, long marked the fighting line between the Italian and Austrian troops but is now a deserted stream without villages or culti-

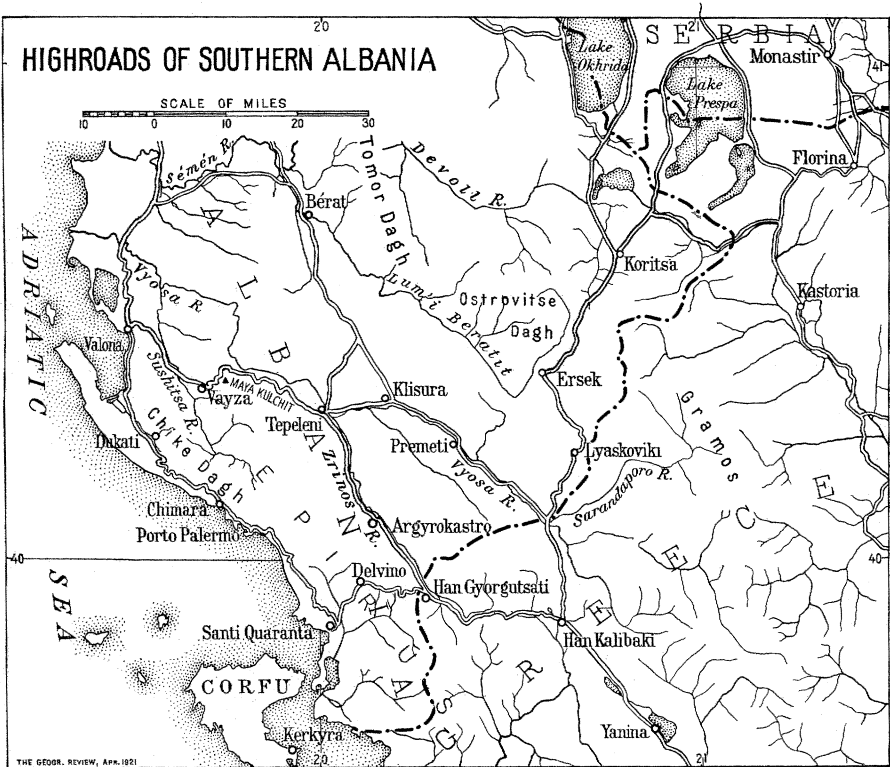


FIG. 1.—Sketch map showing the highroads of Southern Albania. Scale approximately 1:1,700,000.

vation along its lower course. The road climbs the rugged Mt. Kulchit to pass into the Vyosa valley. A sharp turn into the pass of Vayza fairly takes away one's breath, while beyond the road winds over the mountain flanks like a wind-blown cobweb many hundred feet above the river bed.

On one side looms the overhanging mountain; on the other, far across the valley, a grand but desolate scene of mountain on mountain extends to the distant peaks about the pass called Chafa Glavs, a curious landmark among the chaos of hills. Between this and the Vayza a crag juts boldly from the valley in the form of a crouching panther, and on its crests stand the huts of a colony of the strange Rumeni (Vlachs), a people who trace their descent from the soldiers of the broken legions of Rome who dropped



FIG. 2



FIG. 3

FIG. 2—Turkish Tombs at Tepeleni. Tepeleni, which has its Roman and Venetian memories, became an important Turkish stronghold in the fifteenth century.

FIG. 3—Klisura on the Vyosa River. The Pass of Klisura, where the river has cut a deep gorge through the rugged hills, forms a gateway to Macedonia from the Adriatic.



FIG. 4



FIG. 5

FIG. 4—Kolonia, a village of the remote interior, is situated in a tributary valley of the Zrinos.

FIG. 5—Argyrokastro, a Moslem town of 6,000 inhabitants, stands on a rocky terrace overlooking the plain of the Zrinos. Note the square houses, with thick walls and small windows, a characteristic architectural type of Albania.

out along the Egnatian Way. Their descendants have remained as primitive in their lives as the shepherds of old, content to wander with their flocks over the mountain tops in summer and through the lower valleys with the approach of the winter storms. Their homes are often the caves of the hills, or rude stone huts on the mountain tops, without trees or shelter but secure against intrusion. They are an interesting but little-known people, these nomads, poor but proud of their descent, self-respecting and honest. Their settlements sometimes rise to the dignity of towns, and of these the most important in this region lies near the source of the Vyosa on the western slopes of the Pindus. I have written of them briefly in an earlier article.²



FIG. 6—A characteristic scene in the hills of southern Albania. The abandoned village of Dukay, with its ruined houses, marks the destruction of the Balkan Wars.

The way continues past the gray houses of Lopsi Martolozit, gloomy in appearance as are most Albanian villages except when seen in the sparkling sunlight of these glorious mountains. Beyond, the unroofed houses and abandoned dwellings of the village of Dukay mark the senseless destruction of the Balkan Wars and feuds. The road then drops into a little valley where the wild pear and other fruit trees grow and, crossing a river by the graceful arch of a Venetian bridge, arrives at the ruins of Tepeleni lying at the meeting place of three rivers in front of the pass of Klisura, the ancient gateway of Macedonia. Here the Romans once stopped the invasion of the eastern hordes; and fifteen hundred years later the Venetians came to enjoy the *villeggiatura* in peace and quiet. Now Tepeleni lies a complete ruin, a relic of the ruthless and cruel Balkan Wars of this last decade.

From Tepeleni, from which a new highway is being constructed through the Pass of Klisura, the route of the Zrinos (Drynos) follows an old Turkish

² G. P. Scriven: *The Awakening of Albania*, *Geogr. Rev.*, Vol. 8, 1919, pp. 73-83.

road through a valley well tilled and prosperous and passes the site of the so-called Fountain of Youth, a great spring that bubbles from the mountain side to form a pool and cascades, supplied no doubt by underground rivers fed by the snows above. The pool is framed by an amphitheater of gray hills which overlook the pleasant Zrinos valley. Beyond the fountain the highway crosses an occasional half-ruined bridge of Turkish or Venetian construction, which when slightly restored will still stand the strain of modern field guns, and presently reaches the turn to Argyrokastro, an Aladdin's dream town. Above tower the walls of a stately castle, a newcomer as structures go in Albania but old enough to have been reduced to a picturesque ruin; beneath lies the town, an irregular mass of huddled,



FIG. 7—A typical village site in southern Albania, Nivica Lopes in the hills west of Tepeleni.

gray-roofed buildings from which rise here and there the whitish walls of some church or mosque and the tombstones of a burial ground. On the whole it is a formless town whose narrow, roughly paved streets, without sidewalks, wind tortuously along the hillsides. In front of the open shops or bazaars with their meager wares mingle peasant and soldier, Greek pope and Moslem priest, with a sprinkling of children, pack horses, and donkeys—a scene of blended color, dirt, squalor, and charm, in which Europe has no part.

Beyond Argyrokastro the one level road of this region continues south through the valley shut in by ranges of limestone mountains—deserts of stone, rocky, treeless, and severe. The well-tilled fields lying along the river, though fertile, show little sign of life. As usual in Albania the isolated farms are unoccupied by houses, granary, or stables such as dot the holdings of other lands and add to the comfort and beauty of the countryside. In the morning the peasant comes down from his home in the hills with his buffalo or ox and primitive implements to cultivate the ground while daylight lasts, but when evening comes he returns to his eyrie in the mountains.

Near Han Gyorgutsati the level valley road joins the Turkish highway from Santi Quaranta, which long served as the entrance to southern Albania and the Epirus and indeed formed a connecting link between the Adriatic and Aegean Seas. The *han* is a stopping place for caravans and donkeys, memorable to the traveler, like others of its ilk, for its acute discomfort and vivid insect life. Here it marks an important parting of the ways; to the east the road turns across Albania and through Macedonia to far-away Saloniki; to the west it runs across the mountains of the Chimara to the Adriatic coast opposite Corfu.

THE EASTERN BRANCH TO SALONIKI

The eastern fork of the road, from Gyorgutsati to Saloniki is long and interesting. It passes through regions seldom seen and by places seldom visited which are older than the Christian era. The road was built by the Turk, doubtless following a long-traveled way, and for many years it served him in his control of the western Balkans. Of course it was not always so. Before the war it was scarcely passable, but with the coming of the soldier it was restored and became the main, indeed the only, line of communication to the west for the French and Italian armies of occupation lying west of the salient at Florina (south of Monastir). It may now be traveled from sea to sea as comfortably as any boulevard and must be considered as a masterpiece of road building.

From Han Gyorgutsati the road trends southeastward, crosses the Albanian frontier (as delimited by the London Conference of 1912) and enters Greece. At the relay station of Kalibaki, marked by a few huts, the road forks. A branch turns south to Yanina, an old stronghold of the Turk and now an orderly, violently Greek town. The main road turns north and re-enters Albania near the junction of the Vyosa with the Sarandaporo, crossing the latter by a high-arched Venetian bridge. Here the road branches again; northwestward the route was once well traveled from Yanina to Berat, but in the north it has long been neglected and at present is probably not traversible by wagon; however, it served the Allies during the war as a line of communication by pack.

The main road enters the mountains and ascends the steep grade to the ruins of Lyaskoviki, another victim of the eternal strife between Greek and Albanian. It then continues over forbidding heights to Ersek, where the right flank of the Italian army of Albania rested during the occupation, and thence to the city of Koritsa (Korcha) in the midst of vineyards and orchards, a wealthy and important place with trade in wool, skins, grain, and cheese. Copper deposits have been officially reported here. Passing south of the fine lake of Prespa the military road enters the confines of Macedonia, climbing high into the mountains, then dropping nearly 5,000 feet to Florina, whence the turnpike follows the route of the Via Egnatia over the mountains and into the Vardar valley. Skirting the capital of the

great Philip of Macedon, now marked by a few crumbling stones, it reaches the ancient city of Saloniki, once Thessalonica, on the shore of the Aegean Sea. A wonderful journey of some 400 miles is this trip across the Balkans, every mile of the road a delight to the eyes.

THE WESTERN BRANCH TO THE ADRIATIC

But to return to Gyorgutsati, from which the western branch of the highway leads to the Adriatic. Crossing the formidable hills of Chimara it descends to Delvino with its olive groves, a pleasant town of some commercial importance. Beyond, the road runs through a low, somewhat uninteresting region and, near the village of Metohi a short distance inland from Santi Quaranta, meets the end of the truly extraordinary highway recently constructed along the cliffs from Valona, 82 miles away. This is the greatest of the highways which may be counted among the remarkable achievements of the war.

THE CORNICHE OF A FORGOTTEN RIVIERA

Always varied and picturesque this "Corniche of the Adriatic," as I venture to call it, is often truly magnificent as it passes over stream and mountain, now among the clouds and snow (heights bordering the coast attain elevations over 6,000 feet and are snow-covered during half the year), again at the level of the sea. Here it runs through a wooded defile, there along a precipice edge or jutting out upon a spur a thousand feet above the sea, which spreads like a turquoise veil to the gray-green hills of Corfu and to the dim shores of Italy beyond.

The grandeur and beauty of nature are not the only attractions of this Riviera; to them must be added the interest of history and the charm of romance. Through the Logara Pass the road enters the wild region of the Chimara, haunt of the brigand and of the vendetta. Here the traveler finds many traces of the past. At Vuno the Lion of St. Mark's grins rudely from the rocks; beyond lie uncovered the stones of a Roman road; and near by is the inlet where Caesar's triremes anchored to land his legions on their way to meet Pompey in the field of Pharsalia. Not far beyond, the little roadstead of Porto Palermo with its Roman memories and its Venetian fort and castle, even now mounting modern guns against attack, presents a strange blending of the wars of all ages.

Beautiful as it is, the coast of the Chimara is a lonely one; its mountain slopes lie unpeopled except for an occasional hamlet, like the quaint group of houses that form Chimara, or the hut of some fisherman farmer on the sandy shore of a cove running back into the mountains. It is strange, indeed, that so few people live in this land of promise where soil and climate produce the fruits of Sicily and where hillside and seashore offer as great a return to the thrifty peasant as they do to the tired sojourner of the towns.

Italy has opened to the world a forgotten Riviera more beautiful and interesting than the winter playground of the Mediterranean itself. That the coast of this Riviera lying almost in sight of Italy should have remained so long unknown may appear strange until one remembers the inhospitable nature of the country. The hostility of the natives of the rough, mountainous interior and the long neglect of the Turkish government have combined to render Albania the most inaccessible country of the Balkan Peninsula. Before the war no railroad existed in the country, and few traversible roads. A glimpse of the coast might be had from a passing ship, but little of the beauty or charm of the land could be discovered. Now all is changed. Once the narrow strait from Corfu is crossed, it is but an afternoon's jaunt by motor car from Santi Quaranta to Valona; and from Valona to Brindisi is a mere ferry boat trip of some sixty miles, while Rome itself is hardly more than a night's journey distant.